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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to identify the perceived needs regarding implementation of inhouse training at Northern Arizona Long Distance Corporation (NALD). Specifically, the study was conducted to evaluate whether current and proposed training programs were consistent with company training goals from employer and employee perspectives, to make recommendations for change, and to explore other emergent factors. Participants, four employees and one manager, completed an open-ended questionnaire. In addition, company documents relating to company philosophy, job descriptions, and policies and procedures were examined. Employees were asked questions regarding training experiences in three different sections--prior employment, NALD employment, and using training. A separate list of questions was generated for management in two categories: current NALD training; and strengths and limitations. Data were analyzed using a matrix approach to group responses. Informants' suggestions formed the basis for recommendations summarized in four categories: training goals, selecting a trainer, continuing education and professional development, and corporate culture. Data are graphically displayed using a three-dimensional set of matrices. An appendix provides the complete text of each questionnaire. (LL)

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ED 364 547

Training the Front Lines:

Implementing an In-House Training Program at Northern Arizona Long Distance Corporation

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Introduction

Employees are the lifeblood of any organization. It is these valuable people who maintain contact with customers, the heart of the business, and make certain that other duties vital to the health of the organization are performed. Employees are the front lines of the organization; often the job they perform is the basis for judgment of the entire firm.

It seems only natural that managers would wish to provide these front line representatives with the best training and support, and serve them in any way possible. This concept of servant leadership, developed by Max DePree, *Leadership is an Art* (1989), and *Leadership Jazz* (1992) is based on Robert Greenleaf's book, *Servant Leadership* (1991). Although a combination of influences, Greenleaf in turn attributes the idea to his reading of *A Journey to the East,* by Hermann Hesse (1956).

All too often managers treat issues involving employees, including training and development, as back burner matters, or problems to be hurried through as quickly as possible in order to get on with business. DePree and Greenleaf found greater success and employee satisfaction in the concept of servant leadership:

> It is more difficult, but far more important, to be committed to a corporate concept of persons, the diversity of human gifts, covenantal relationships, lavish communications, including everyone, and believing that leadership is a condition of indebtedness (DePree, 1989, p. 72).

Northern Arizona Long Distance Corporation (NALD) has been implementing the principles of servant leadership in a small communications company which has operated in Flagstaff, Arizona for three years. At the time of this study, NALD had expanded to a retail environment and hired four new employees. The study was

prompted by a need to develop in-house training programs for these and future employees.

Emotions and feelings are valued in the idea of servant leadership. For this reason, qualitative research methods were selected in order to preserve these elements of the data. The procedures used were based on Glesne and Peshkin, *Becoming Qualitative Researcher* (1992), and Strauss and Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research* (1990).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify the perceived needs regarding implementation of in house training at Northern Arizona Long Distance Corporation (NALD). Specifically, this study proposes to:

1. evaluate whether current and proposed training programs are consistent with company training goals from the employer and employee perspectives,
2. make recommendations for changes in the NALD program, and
3. explore other emergent factors.

Procedures

Population and Sample Selection

As the number of employees at NALD is relatively small, only five employees and two managers, it was decided to include the entire population in the study, with the exception of the researcher who is one of the company's managers. One employee was unable to participate due to geographic location and inaccessibility at the time of the

study. Study participants for the duration of the project included four employees and one manager.

Once permission was obtained from the management of NALD, all study participants received a memo explaining the purposes of the study, outlining what was expected of the participants, and guaranteeing confidentiality of response and the independence of study data from personnel records.

Data Collection

Ideally, data would be collected from documents, and multiple in-depth interviews with employees and managers. Journals should also be maintained by both parties during the training process.

Due to the time limitations of this study, and the difficulty of conducting extensive interviews during the work day, the researcher elected to collect data through the use of an open-ended questionnaire to be completed by subjects during the work day. Brief follow-up interviews were used on an as-needed basis to clarify or expand responses.

Company documents relating to Company Philosophy, Job Descriptions, and Policies and Procedures were also examined.

Measuring Instrument

The open-ended questionnaire used in this study was developed by the researcher. Employees were asked questions regarding training experiences in three different sections: Prior Employment, NALD Employment, and Using Training. The employment sections focused on the job requirements, type and contents of the training program, and feelings during and after training. The Using Training section focused on perceptions of training and attempted to establish the "ideal" in employee training programs.

A separate list of questions was generated for management in two categories: Current NALD Training, and Strengths and Limitations. The Current NALD Training section deals with the manager's perceived goals for the training programs and feelings during the training process. The Strengths and Limitations section prompts managers to evaluate the training process and make recommendations.

It is important to note that both managers and employees were invited, in a final question, to make additional comments regarding job training. The open-ended nature of the survey questions, coupled with this final invitation for subjects to make any additional points of importance to them, provides the opportunity to explore other factors as they emerge and is consistent with a qualitative grounded theory approach (Strauss, 1990). The complete text of each questionnaire is located in Appendix A.

Analysis and Coding Methods

Data from this study were analyzed using a matrix approach to group responses. All categories and data divisions were determined after follow-up processes were complete, in order to allow for respondent generated groupings. Due to the small number of participants hand coding was feasible.

Limitations and Problems

Several difficulties became apparent during the course of the study. First, it was noticed that in several instances, questions were answered superficially, or not at all. Although the follow-up interviews eliminated the majority of the problem by further probing, two questions still failed to generate any detailed response:

- Describe a problem that has recently arisen at work. How did you handle (are you handling) it?
- Describe a recent accomplishment at work that you feel proud of.

In the case of each of these questions, it is believed that the role of the researcher was indistinguishable from the role of manager, although none of the employees report directly to the researcher/manager. Therefore, in spite of a promise of confidentiality and separation of data from all personnel materials, employees were unable to be candid.

Although, the researcher was focusing on the *results* of training and the *solving* of problems, respondents still were hesitant to admit that problems existed. Likewise, employees did not feel comfortable "bragging" on their accomplishments. These two questions contained the sparsest responses on the entire questionnaire. It is believed that this limitation could be overcome by using an "outside" research team with no personal stake in the organization.

A second difficulty was the lack of availability of management. The written questionnaire was intended to ease the burden on the manager by allowing him a chance to complete his responses according to his own schedule and contacting him later to clarify responses as needed. However, this approach seemed to put the study on a "back burner." After almost two weeks of waiting for the survey, results were finally achieved using a personal interview.

A final limitation of the study deals with the analysis of insufficiencies in the NALD training program. Although employees were asked to identify weaknesses it should be noted that many employees are new and have not yet completed training; therefore insufficiencies, certain to exist, would not yet be apparent to them.

Results and Interpretation

The result of the coding process was a three-dimensional set of matrices: employee position by question category by employer. Throughout the research process it became apparent that employees in the Sales and Customer Service areas had very different needs and expectations in a training program. Therefore, it was decided to divide the analysis by employee position. Within each position, the researcher analyzed the results of three different categories of questions (each on a separate matrix) including: Training Mechanics, Employee Impressions, and Using Training. The third dimension of the matrix divided the responses into those that applied to Former Job Training, and those that applied to NALD Training. A column was also included to help classify recommendations in each general area. Figures 1 through 6 illustrate the findings.

Figure 1

Training Mechanics Matrix:
Customer Service Representatives

TRAINING MECHANICS	Former Job Training	NALD Training	Recommendations
Job Requirements:	• Accounts Receivable • Bookkeeping • Customer Service • Product Sales • Phone Skills • Manage Other Employees	• Accounts Receivable • Customer Service • Billing	• Training goals should be designed which reflect job requirements. • Choose trainers who are both good teachers and topic proficient. • Consider peer training. • Avoid trainers who are "on their way out"
Trainer:	• Office Manager • Managers of Department or Areas (not necessarily in area worked in)	• Office Manager (was leaving) • President/Operations Manager	
Length of Training:	• Could not remember • 2 to 6 days	• Ongoing (many employees are new and few have completed training as of this study)	
Topics Covered:	• None • Product Knowledge • Policies/Procedures • Selling/Customer Relations Skills	• Computer Skills	

Figure 2

Employee Impressions Matrix:
Customer Service Representatives

EMPLOYEE IMPRESSIONS	Former Job Training	NALD Training	Recommendations
Feelings During and After Training:	• Insufficient quantity of training • Afraid of failure • Inadequate • Uncomfortable • Confident	• Need more computer training, would like to take classes	• Train in stages. Long or condensed sessions appear to stimulate fear and hurt retention. • Provide incentives for professional education, i.e. community college classes. • Cultivate a corporate culture based on the "Servant Leadership" *
Insufficiencies:	• Sessions were hurried • No opportunity for questions • Heavy focus on facts • *Turned loose* on the job • Training was non-existent	• No Responses (many employees are new and have not completed training as of this study)	
Strengths:	• Professional, business-like attitude • Taught to deal with *difficult customers*	• Step by step approach • Patience when teaching new topic	

* Servant Leadership is a concept based on the work of Max Depree, *Leadership is an Art* and Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership.*

Figure 3

Using Training Matrix:
Customer Service Representatives

USING TRAINING	Former Job Training	NALD Training	Recommendations
Problem Resolution:	• Had to keep "bugging" the management	• No problems have arisen	• Train employees to recognize problem areas and empower them to resolve those problems.
Accomplishments:	• Honored as a top sales person	• Achieving new computer skills	• Honor and reward accomplishments

Figure 4

Training Mechanics Matrix:
Sales Representatives

TRAINING MECHANICS	Former Job Training	NALD Training	Recommendations
Job Requirements:	• Set sales goals and objectives • Marketing • Promotion • Manage sales personnel • Motivate sales force	• Organizing product lines • Marketing • Develop leads • Developing and implementing sales strategy	• Training should focus heavily on product knowledge and sales skills. • Choose trainers who are both good teachers and topic proficient. • Avoid having a non-sales person teach sales-skills.
Trainer:	• Professional Instructor • Owner	• President/Operations Manager	
Length of Training:	• 2 to 3 days	• Ongoing (many employees are new and few have completed training as of this study)	
Topics Covered:	• Sales Approach • Treatment of Customer • Closing the Sale • Product knowledge	• Product Knowledge • Some Computer	

Figure 5

Employee Impressions Matrix:
Sales Representatives

EMPLOYEE IMPRESSIONS	Former Job Training	NALD Training	Recommendations
Feelings During and After Training:	• Motivated • Excited • Accomplished • Knowledgeable about sales techniques	• Confused	• Highly technical product knowledge training should be subdivided into digestible pieces.
Insufficiencies:	• No Response	• No Response (many employees are new and few have completed training as of this study)	• Provide opportunities for professional development including sales training seminars. The sales force appears to be best motivated by a successful sales professional.
Strengths:	• Professional Sales Training	• On the job training	

Figure 6

Using Training Matrix:
Sales Representatives

USING TRAINING	Former Job Training	NALD Training	Recommendations
Problem Resolution:	• No Response	• "?"	• Train employees to recognize problem areas and empower them to resolve those problems.
Accomplishments:	• No Response	• Developing sales flyer	• Honor and reward accomplishments.

Customer Service Representatives

A comparison of the job requirements and the training presented in the responses of the Customer Service Representatives revealed that a skills/training mismatch may exist at NALD as well as at the prior employers. Several of the job functions cited received no emphasis as a training topic.

In addition, the choice of topics was often at the discretion of a trainer who may or may not have experience in the employee's actual work area. In one case at NALD, training was conducted by an employee who was leaving the firm. While it may seem logical to have an experienced person train his/her replacement, it must be remembered that the employee who is leaving has no stake or ownership in the organization (DePree, 1989, p. 99). This is true as well, though perhaps to a slightly lessor degree, for the "displaced" trainer who is attempting to impart up-to-date information in an area where the trainer may only have a "nodding acquaintance".

Unfortunately, the nodding acquaintance approach leaves trainees feeling uncomfortable, inadequate and afraid of failure. One respondent said of her former employer, " I didn't always catch on to what they were saying but wasn't given a chance to speak up because they were in such a hurry to get done and get us out of there."

In fact, in only one instance of prior employment was the training program praised, and resulted in feelings of confidence; the employees were treated in a "professional, business-like manner."

Responses regarding NALD training were limited as many employees have not yet completed their training programs. Customer Service Representatives praised the "step-by-step" approach and expressed a strong interest in more computer training, possibly through college classes.

Sales Representatives

Training for Sales Representatives is threefold: a delicate balance of sales skills, product information, and sales support skills. Overall, training offered for sales people appeared to be a better match to the job descriptions than training offered for other positions.

Training in sales skills was often conducted by a professional instructor, leaving the sales force motivated and more knowledgeable about sales techniques. This technique was preferred by Sales Representatives. Praise was also given to seminars and other professional development opportunities as a way of establishing contacts.

Of the two Sales Representatives questioned, one possessed a technical background and the other did not. Not surprisingly, the employee who was limited in technical knowledge reported feeling "confused" during NALD's highly technical product training, and only "slightly less confused" afterward. Though no insufficiencies were specifically cited, Sales Representatives have responded favorably to NALD's decision to offer the product training in shorter class sessions.

The final area, sales support skills, relates to the basic office skills that Sales Representatives must perform since a secretarial staff is not available to them. No one at NALD, not even management, has a secretary. Again no insufficiencies were cited, but computer skills were mentioned as a limited part of training.

Using Training Matrix

The lack of responses in the Using Training matrix were discussed briefly as limitations to the study and occurred with both Customer Service and Sales Representatives. The absence of response, however, should be seen as significant in itself. In some cases the space was left blank, another employee reported that there were no problems, and a third responded on paper with "?" and was unable to clarify his response when questioned in person.

It is the researcher's belief that these responses indicate an unwillingness to recognize or admit the existence of problems. This behavior is historically the fault of management and its failure to deal adequately with employee difficulties when presented. One respondent said " I had to keep bugging the management and I had to keep several months worth of loss of sales until they finally listened..." Worse yet, the employees themselves cited that they were often blamed for such problems.

In regards to the question of accomplishment, it is the belief of the researcher that, employees like all people, are conditioned not to brag and that being proud is a fault. Employees wait for managers to recognize their accomplishments. Often, they wait in vain (DePree, 1992, p.107).

The Ideal Training Program

An additional matrix also evolved from the coding process, comparing and contrasting employee ideals with management goals. These "goals" were obtained through the interview with the manager, and also through statements in the company's Policy and Training Manual. It is interesting to note that many of the items on the employee side of the "wish list" focus on intangibles, such as atmosphere, feelings, and communications. While these items are addressed in the corporate literature, the goals focused on in the interview centered around proficient job performance. A series of recommendations is also included in the matrix, shown in Figure 7, that will help move toward accommodating the "wishes" of both managers and employees.

Figure 7

The Ideal Training Program:
An Employee "Wish List" Compared with Management Goals

EMPLOYEE IDEALS	MANAGEMENT GOALS	PROGRAM RECOMMENDATIONS
Step by Step Approach Hands-On Training Trainer Corrects Errors Atmosphere Communication Between Trainer and Trainee Making Employee Feel Important Making Employee Feel Adequate Fun and Informative Opportunities for Professional Development	Knowledge of Company Policies and Procedures Proficient Job Skills Effective Communication Between Management and Employees, and Between Peers Commitment to Continuing Education A Pleasant, Non-threatening, Working Environment	• Keep policies human. Be sensitive to employee emotions and treat all workers with dignity and respect. Take the time to ask how they are doing, and mean it. Remember birthdays and other special events. Show appreciation. Embrace "Servant Leadership." • Honor employees who have done outstanding work, have been complimented by customers or peers, or have devoted years of service to the company. • Develop a flexible training program with specific requirements for each job category. This will keep training focused and relevant. • Allow employees to train with more than one person, including peers if possible, in order to develop a network for problem solving and communication. • Actively promote continuing education, making employees aware of the tuition assistance policy and the availability of flexible work schedules. • Promote professional development by encouraging employee attendance at professional luncheons and seminars. Stress that for many events, fees will be paid by NALD.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The recommendations from each stage of analysis in the matrices were summarized in four basic categories:

- Training Goals
- Selecting a Trainer
- Continuing Education and Professional Development
- Corporate Culture

Although Corporate Culture has been included as a separate category, it must be emphasized that it is really all-encompassing, and that each recommendation in the other categories can only be effective to the extent that the corporate culture permits. For example, the promotion of continuing education will be severely limited if employee efforts and achievements are not recognized. Likewise, flexible work schedules mean nothing if the request process to get them approved is cumbersome and unfriendly. Each of the following specific recommendations must be considered and implemented in conjunction with the changes in the corporate culture.

Training Goals

- Develop a flexible training program with specific requirements for each job category. This will keep training focused and relevant. For example, sales training should focus heavily on product knowledge and sales skills.
- Train in stages. Long or condensed sessions appear to stimulate fear and hurt retention.
- Highly technical product knowledge training should be subdivided into digestible pieces.

Selecting a Trainer

- Choose trainers who are both good teachers and topic proficient.
- Avoid having a non-sales person teach sales-skills.
- Allow employees to train with more than one person, including peers if possible, in order to develop a network for problem solving and communication.
- Avoid trainers who are "on their way out".

Continuing Education and Professional Development

- Provide opportunities for professional development, including sales training seminars. The sales force appears to be best motivated by a successful sales professional.
- Actively promote continuing education, such as community college classes, making employees aware of the tuition assistance policy and the availability of flexible work schedules.
- Promote professional development by encouraging employee attendance at professional luncheons and seminars. Stress that for many events, fees will be paid by NALD.

Corporate Culture

- Cultivate a corporate culture based on "Servant Leadership" (Greenleaf, 1991) and (DePree, 1989).
- Keep policies human. Be sensitive to employee emotions and treat all workers with dignity and respect. Take the time to ask how they are doing, and mean it. Remember birthdays and other special events. Show appreciation. Embrace "Servant Leadership."

- Honor employees who have done outstanding work, have been complimented by customers or peers, or have devoted years of service to the company.
- Train employees to recognize problem areas and empower them to resolve those problems.

For Future Study

It is also recommended that this study be repeated in approximately one year in order to assess the progress made by NALD. It is further recommended that an "outside" team of researchers be used in order to obtain compete honesty of respondents.

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Appendix A

Measuring Instrument

Employee Questions:

SECTION 1: Prior Employment

1. Where did you work prior to NALD?
2. What was your position?
3. Describe your job requirements.
4. Describe the type of training you participated in.
5. Who conducted the training?
6. What topics were included in your training program.
7. How did you feel during training?
8. How did you feel after training?
9. How long did training last?

SECTION 2: NALD Employment

1. When did you start working at NALD?
2. What is your position?
3. Describe your job requirements.
4. Describe the type of training you participated in.
5. Who conducted the training?
6. What topics were included in your training program.
7. How did you feel during training?
8. How did you feel after training?
9. How long did training last?

SECTION 3: Using Training

1. What was the "best" or "most helpful" part of training?
2. Describe a problem that has recently arisen at work. How did you handle (are you handling) it.?
3. Describe a recent accomplishment at work that you feel proud of.
4. What do you think are the three most important parts of a company's training program.
5. Please feel free to make any other comments regarding job training.

Management Questions:

SECTION 1: Current NALD Training

1. In what areas have you conducted training programs at NALD?
2. Describe the format of these programs.
3. What are your goals for training programs in each of the areas mentioned?
4. How did you feel while conducting training?
5. How did you feel after training?
6. How long did training last?

SECTION 2: Strengths and Limitations

1. What questions do you remember employees asking either during or soon after training.
2. What subjects or concepts do employees have the most trouble "getting?"
3. What do you think are the strongest aspects of the NALD training program?
4. What would you change about the current NALD training program?
5. Please feel free to make any other comments regarding job training.